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Health

Cancer

Warning Before It Is Too Late

LOS ANGELES — "The germs of environmental cancer in the year 2,000 are in our environment right now. My concern is, will we sit here in the year 2,000 and say, 'Why didn't we do what we should have done to prevent this in 1972?'"

This concern, expressed by Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of Mount Sinai School of Medicine, underlay much of the discussion at the Seventh National Cancer Conference here last week.

Estimates are that 75 to 85 per cent of all cancers are directly or indirectly caused by factors in the environment — most of them potentially avoidable. Accordingly, Dr. Frank Rauscher, director of the National Cancer Institute, said that in the next five years the Government would triple the amount of money spent on research in environmentally caused cancers — from $25-million to $75-million a year. The targets of research can be expected to include such common factors as the meat we eat, the liquids we drink and the substances in the air we breathe.

The current interest in defining and eliminating environmental causes of cancer stems in large part from the dismal consequences that followed the failure to realize the hazards of cigarette smoking 30 years ago.

Each year, more than 84,000 Americans die of lung cancer. An estimated 57,000 of these deaths would not occur if the victims had not smoked cigarettes. And these figures do not include the smoking-related deaths from heart disease and many other forms of cancer.

Now, Dr. Selikoff and others have discovered, we are sitting on yet another major environmental powder keg—asbestos. Although it has been known for some years that asbestos workers are prone to lung cancer and an otherwise rare tumor called mesothelioma, the risk to persons not occupationally exposed to asbestos particles was thought to be minimal.

According to a report presented here by Dr. Selikoff, it now appears that workers who were indirectly exposed to asbestos also face an increased risk of getting mesothelioma, an invariably fatal cancer that involves the lining of the chest or abdomen. The disease develops about 30 years after initial exposure to asbestos.

Dr. Selikoff and others have begun to find cases of mesothelioma among people who worked in shipyards during World War II. Although they did not work directly with asbestos they presumably inhaled particles of asbestos that were around the yards. Dr. Selikoff predicted that in the next few years, an epidemic of mesothelioma would occur among former shipyard workers.

But Dr. Selikoff's concerns go beyond persons occupationally exposed to asbestos. Particles of this mineral, four million tons of which are produced annually, can be found in the air that most people breathe. "We have to take our cues from those most extensively exposed," Dr. Selikoff said. "This is obviously a substance we must control."

Other substances Dr. Selikoff is studying as possible cancer-inducing agents in the environment include carbon black (in dust from rubber tires), talc (in foods and cosmetics), trace metals (in foods and polluted air), polychlorinated biphenyls (in paper products and containers) and diethylstilbestrol (in meat products).

The possibility that something in the meat we eat may be contributing to our cancer risk was also raised by Dr. John W. Berg, epidemiologist at the National Cancer Institute, in exploring the dramatic increase in the incidence of bowel cancer among Japanese who migrate to the United States. Dr. Berg said that an increase in meat consumption emerged as a likely suspect. Bowel cancer strikes 76,000 Americans each year, and along with lung cancer is the most common kinds of cancer experienced in this country.

Dr. Berg said that other countries that are high meat consumers—including Argentina and Scotland—also have high rates of bowel cancer.

Other studies Dr. Berg described have pointed to heavy alcohol intake in conjunction with cigarette smoking as a possible cause of cancer of the esophagus, a tumor that is increasing by epidemic proportions in the United States, particularly among black Americans.

Nitrates and Nitrites used to preserve many foods are being investigated as possible causes of stomach cancer, a major cancer killer in such countries as Japan, Iceland and Finland.

The search for environmental causes of cancer, therefore, is worldwide. Dr. John Higginson outlined 70 different research programs now being conducted by the International Agency for Research on Cancer in an effort to identify these factors.

But, as Dr. Rauscher noted, identification is not nearly enough. Once identified, the cause must be controlled—either by eliminating it, by rendering it harmless or by blocking man's susceptibility to it. A major part of the Cancer Institute program, Dr. Rauscher said, will concentrate on the latter two approaches.

—JANE E. BRODY

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